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ABSTRACT

To determine how basal readers reflect the different kinds of family living found in American society today, information was gathered through an analysis of 462 stories relating to family life in eight basal reading series in grades one to six and a single series in grades one through three. Only fiction stories about children were used. The survey form included the following categories: two-parent families (two biological parents, one biological and one step-parent, two adoptive parents, and foster parents), one-parent families (mother only, father only, one adoptive parent), and significant adult (custodial relative, grandparents, babysitter, teacher). Also noted were the number of siblings; location of the story; employment status of mother; whether divorced, deceased, or never married parents were mentioned; and whether references cited were in picture or in text. Results showed that the two-parent family was the most prevalent, comprising 53% of the total stories. Only 19% of the families were portrayed as one-parent families. Divorce was mentioned only three times and the death of a parent only once. Only 16% of the family stories depicted a working mother, and the greatest reference to significant adults was to grandparents. In summary, the study concluded that the typical American family is being portrayed as having two parents and two children living in a house in the suburbs. (The survey form is included in the appendix.) (HOD)

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A Study of How Basal Readers Reflect Family Living Styles

by

Grace Conway
and
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine how basal readers reflect the units of family living found in American society today.

Information was gathered through a survey made of stories relating to family life in eight basal reading series grades one to six and one series grades one through three.

A total of 462 stories were surveyed. The two-parent family was found to be the most prevalent, comprising fifty-three percent of the total stories. Only nineteen percent of the families were portrayed as one-parent families. This study concludes that the typical American family is being portrayed as having two parents and two children living in a house in the suburbs.

Family life has significantly changed in America over the last generation. Not only are children found living in two-parent families but also in single-parent families with either mother or father as head of the household (due to divorce, separation or death), with single never married parents and also with adoptive parents, foster parents, step-parents and grandparents. According to the 1980 U. S. Bureau of the Census, approximately 25% of the children in the United States are currently residing in one-parent homes. Damon (1979) predicted that 40% of the children born in this decade will live in single-parent families for part of their childhood.

Since children are exposed daily to basal readers, it is important that stories portray family life in a realistic manner. According to Kelly and Wallerstein (1979) emphasis on the two-parent family has created a greater sense of aloneness and differentness in many children. Students should be able to identify with characters in basal stories and relate to other children living in single-parent homes. A child's ability to cope with life can be increased by providing exposure to various types of family styles.

Robert Kealey (1980) has stated that reading helps a person to grow affectively and that stories can help students realize that other children do live happily in single-parent families.

According to Kelly and Wallerstein (1979) the devotion,

until lately, of classroom reading materials to the two-parent, intact family has created a greater sense of aloneness or differentness in many children. They have stated that:

> "Classroom teaching that acknowledges and discusses the many variants of family life; one-parent households; father-headed and mother-headed; remarried families; two-parent families; extended families - make children feel secure with their won particular family structure."

As reported by Patricia McCormack (1981), a survey conducted by the National Committee for Citizens in Colombia, Maryland, found that only 8% of single parents said children's textbooks contained any families other than two-parent families. They complained that this contributed to their child's sense of "being out of it". According to Clay (1980) even though single-parent families are still a minority, they are no longer an oddity. Schools must realize that a growing number of students come from one-parent homes.

Lindgren (1962) noted the importance of the relationship of reading materials to a child's experiencial background. He stated that:

> "If we are to plan instructional methods and curriculum in such a way as to make sense to students, their background must be taken into account. A third-grade reader that describes a family whose father works in an office, whose children play with ponies and electric trains and whose home is surrounded by wide green lawns will have little meaning for children who live in a crowded down-at-the-heels section of a large city. The life that such a reader describes is just not part of their personal experience; it deals with images that are foreign and largely unknown to them."

Frank Brown (1980) has stated that school curriculums must undergo changes to better meet the newly identified needs of a growing number of children from one-parent families. One way to meet this need is through the basal readers. According to Janet Lerner (1981) surveys have found the basal reader to be the major tool for reading instruction in 90% to 95% of the elementary classrooms throughout the country.

Since it has been the most widely used instrument for reading instruction for the past fifty years, the basal reader has been a continual target of research and criticism. Recently, some of that research has focused on the types of family situations depicted in the reading material children use daily. Most of this research is based on the premise that the models of family life presented in basals communicate values to children and affect their attitude toward and acceptance of their own family living situations.

The most recent research was conducted by Nancy Evans in April, 1982. In her study of eight basal series (grades 1-3), she found a deficiency of representation of one-parent families. Remarriage, step-parents and step-children were never mentioned.

A previous study by Robert Kealey (1980) of the second grade reading basals of five publishers showed that "between 22% to 50% of children in basal reader stories live in single parent families". This finding would correspond to the 1980

U.S. Bureau of the Census which stated that approximately 25% of the student population reside in one-parent families.

Jane Sutton's study, (1981) which involved a random sampling of seven basal reading series (grades 4,5,6), concluded that the stories did depict current family situations in correlation with the statistics of the population as a whole. However, there was no mention of step-parents and only one mention on non-custodial parents.

As can be seen in the related research, not many studies are available in this area. Those that have been done did not include all levels of any particular basal series. Prior studies in this area either have included random samplings of stories or have been limited to three or less grade levels. The largest number of reading series surveyed was eight, on three grade levels. Those studies completed have not agreed in all areas. Results of these studies have indicated conflicting conclusions.

HYPOTHESIS

To gain a more accurate overview of the situation, a study was conducted to determine how precisely basal readers reflect the units of family living found in American society today. It was hypothesized that stories contained in current basal reading series do not accurately reflect the units of family living found in American society today.

DEFINITIONS

Two-parent families are defined as families containing both biological parents living at home.

One-parent families are defined as families in which one parent and his or her children are living at home as the result of divorce, separation, death or having never married.

Extended families are defined as all other members of the family- aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.

Adoptive families are defined as families which have adopted a child.

Step-parent families are defined as families involving the remarriage of a parent.

Siblings are defined as brothers and sisters whether biological or adopted.

PROCEDURES

A descriptive study was conducted to assess whether current basal readers accurately reflect the variety of family lifestyles in existance today. For the purpose of collecting and recording data, a survey form was designed. The most current publications available of eight and one-half basal reading series were surveyed to first find those stories relating to families. Only fictitious stories about children were used. All animal stories, poetry, biographies, myths, historical and non-fictional articles were not included.

The survey form included the following categories: two-parent families (two biological parents, one biological and one step-parent, two adoptive parents and foster parents), one-parent families (mother only, father only, one adoptive parent) and significant adult (custodial relative, grandparents, babysitter, teacher). Also noted were the number of siblings, location of the story, employment status of mother and whether divorced, deceased or never married parents when mentioned. An indication was made as to whether references cited were in picture or text. Upon completion of the survey, the data was tabulated and analyzed to meet the purpose of the study and to test the hypothesis.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

A total of 462 stories from eight basal series grades one through six, and one series grades one through three, were surveyed. Only the most recent series from each publisher was used.

Of the total number of stories, 2,424, only 462 of the stories dealt with family situations in any manner as noted in Table I, or stated another way, an average of 51 stories of the average of 269 stories were related to this topic. It can be seen that the Holt series contained the greatest number of stories related to the family and Open Court the least.

Table I

Basal Reading Series classified by Total Stories, Total Family Stories and Total Percentage of Stories About the Family--Grades 1-6.

	Total Stories	Total Family Stories	% Family Stories
Allyn & Bacon	267	57	21
Economy	316	49	16
Ginn	274	53	19
Harcour Brace	202	38	19
D.C. Heath	262	45	17
Holt	259	71	27
Merrill	192	57	30
Open Court	320	39	12
Rand Mc Nally	332	53	16
Totals	2,424	462	177
Average	269	51	19

When divided into the primary and intermediate grades, as can be seen in Table II, there is a distinct difference

Table II

Basal Reading Series classified by Total Family Stories and Percentages of Stories About the Family--Primary and Intermediate Grades.

Grades 1-3

	Stories	Family Stories	% of Total
Allyn & Bacon	160	48	30
Economy	207	38	18
Ginn	154	39	25
Harcourt Brace	165	26	15
D.C. Heath	114	32	28
Holt	119	54	45
Merrill	192	57	29
Open Court	189	10	5
Rand Mc Nally	153	22	14
Totals	1,453	326	209
Average	161	36	23

Grades 4-6

	Stories	Family Stories	% of Total
Allyn & Bacon	107	9	8
Economy	109	11	10
Ginn	120	14	11
Harcourt Brace	127	12	9
D.C. Heath	148	13	8
Holt	140	17	12
Merrill	-	-	-
Open Court	151	29	19
Rand Mc Nally	179	31	17
Totals	1,081	136	94
Average	135	17	12

in the percentage of stories dealing with the family. At the primary level approximately twenty-three percent of the stories are family related, while at the intermediate level only twelve percent deal with the family.

As can be seen in Table III, the composition of family

Table III

Composition of Family Units categorized by Number of Stories and Percentage of Family Stories--Primary and Intermediate Grades.

Grades	1-3	4-6	Total	% of Family Stories
Two-parent Families	170	79	249	53
One-parent Families	56	33	89	19
Mother-headed	26	21	47	10
Father-headed	30	12	42	9
Significant Adult				
Grandparents	23	35	58	12
Teacher	3	12	15	3
Baby-sitter	0	1	1	0
Aunt or Uncle	0	7	7	1

units found in basal readers, was primarily the two-parent

family, compromising fifty-three percent of the total stories. Only nineteen percent of the families are portrayed as one-parent families, with ten percent headed by mothers only and nine percent by fathers alone. Divorce is mentioned three times and the death of a parent only once. Sixteen percent of the family stories made mention of working mothers, either in one or two parent families.

In the category of significant adults, the greatest reference was to grandparents, whether custodial or living in the same home. Twelve percent of family stories dealt with grandparents, most in the traditional manner, as white-haired and kindly. There were three stories dealing directly with the relationship of the child and his grandparents, and it was in these stories that the grandparent was seen in more modern, non-stereotyped roles. Aunts and uncles were mentioned only seven times. Teachers were included significantly fifteen times in the lives of children while baby-sitters, surprisingly, only once.

In family situations, three stories mentioned foster parents and one involved adoptive parents. There were never any references to parental remarriage, step-parents or children of never married parents.

As noted in Table IV, siblings were mentioned in fifty-one percent of the family stories. Twenty-three percent of those families had two children, while only one percent had four or more. The category of No Siblings included only

Table IV

Number of Stories and Percentages of Family Stories classified by Number of Siblings.

Grades	1-3	4-6	Total	% of Family Stories
No Sibling	23	18	41	8
One Sibling	71	38	109	23
Two Siblings	44	17	61	13
Three Siblings	9	11	20	4
Four of More Siblings	5	1	6	1

those situations in which it was obvious that the child involved was an only child. Eight percent of the family stories were included in this category.

Thirty eight persent of the family life situations took place in the suburbs. Twenty-five percent were located in urban settings while twenty-seven percent were found in the rural areas category which included farms, camp-sites and shore areas.

CONCLUSIONS

Do the stories contained in current basal reading series accurately reflect the units of family living found in American society today?

The majority of stories in basal readers do not deal with family in any way. There are a great many stories and articles that deal with history, myths, animals, biographies and science. Only nineteen percent of the stories found in basal readers were about contempory family life.

It is the conclusion of the researchers that compared to society as a whole, the stories depicting families do not reflect the current statistics. According to the 1980 U.S. Bureau of the Census, approximately 25% of the children in the United States are currently residing in one-parent homes. In the survey there were approximately 19% of the stories about one-parent families. However, it should be noted that Damon had predicted that 40% of the children born in this decade will live in one-parent families for part of their childhood.

Although the majority of one-parent families are headed by women, statistics in this survey showed that both father and mother are being equally represented. This might indicate an attempt on the part of publishers to keep pace with the increasing responsibilities males are taking as heads of one-parent households.

At present there are more than fifteen million children under eighteen years of age in the United States who have been affected by divorce. However, divorce is only mentioned three times in the survey. Bernice and Morton Hunt have stated that approximately one out of eight children lives with a remarried parent. Yet no remarriage was mentioned in the survey. Step-parents are mentioned only once in the survey yet ten percent of all children in 1978 lived with a natural parent and a step-parent (Norton).

Although Hunt has stated that over half of all school

children have mothers who work and are not home after school, only sixteen percent of the family stories depicted a working mother.

The survey showed that the greatest reference to significant adults was to grandparents. Aunts and uncles were mentioned only seven times. The survey did find that teachers played a significant role in the lives of children in the stories related to families, particularly to children in the intermediate grades.

The majority of family stories still depict the typical family as having two children. Of the 40% of the families which mentioned siblings, 23% had two children while only 1% had four or more.

The survey also permits the conclusion that the majority of family stories are set in the suburbs while the fewest are set in the urban areas.

In summary, the data compiled from the survey seems to indicate that the typical American family is still being portrayed as having two parents and two children living in a house in the suburbs.

IMPLICATIONS

Many implications can be made as a result of this survey. Although a valid attempt by publishers of basal readers is evident in depicting one-parent families, a continued effort should be made to relate the number of one-parent stories with the rising statistics of the overall population. An

effective teacher should use these stories to help children realize that one-parent families can be happy places in which to grow up.

Divorce, death of a parent and remarriage can be a major crisis in the life of a child. Publishers and teachers must become more aware of their obligation to help children cope with these situations.

Publishers should continue to strive to show family life in a variety of settings. Schools should choose a basal which include settings relative to the lifestyles of the child within their community.

It is the responsibility of publishers, school districts and teachers to be aware of the changing lifestyles as they exist in America today. They must strive to choose a basal which depicts various lifestyles and fits the needs of their school population.

RELATED RESEARCH

It is necessary for schools today to cope with a growing number of social problems not directly related to educating children. Divorce is the primary one (Solnit). Recent research on the effects of divorce on children raises a serious question for educators. Can we ignore the problem and still carry out our major task? Divorce has more than doubled in the past decade. Fifty percent of all divorces involve children (Norton). At present there are more than fifteen million children under eighteen years of age in the United States who have been affected by divorce. Wilkinson and Bleck estimated that twenty percent of elementary school children have divorced parents. Bernice and Morton Hunt have stated that one out of six school children now lives with only one parent and approximately one out of eight children lives with a remarried parent. Two out of five children born in this decade will live in single-parent families for part of their childhood.

In addition to divorce more and more families, whether consisting of one or two parents, are finding for one reason or another it is necessary for all the adults to work outside the home. When working parents finally do get home, they are often to tired to listen to or help the child (Kurth). Coinciding with this is the fact that over half of all school children have mothers who work and are not home after school (Hunt).

According to Kelly and Wallerstein "children in the

earliest stages of mastering reading may be most vulnerable to the disorganizing effects of family disruption. Research confirms that divorce precipates a major crisis in the lives of most children and that the stress engendered by the crisis often spills over into the academic arena." Children who have previously lived in a two-parent family react to separation and divorce with shock, disbelief, fear and anxiety even when the marriage has been poor. Even though divorce is prevalent in today's society, each individual child struggles alone. Solace is not found in numbers (Kelly and Wallerstein).

In a five year longitudinal study of sixty North California divorcing families involving one hundred and thirty one children, three to eighteen years of age, Kelly and Wallerstein noted the following characteristics of school behavior: half of the children showed a high level of anxiety and restlessness, difficulty concentrating on schoolwork, having to put forth a tremendous effort to maintain good work, increases daydreaming and sadness and depression.

Since the number of divorces in the United States is more likely to increase than decrease, the task of helping the growing number of children who have divorced parents falls on the school. If it is the task of the school to help children realize their full potential and, by so doing, to cope with the problems of life as they arise, then schools

must more and more recognize the great influence of divorce on a child's life. The school may become the most stable element in the lives of many children whose parents are divorced. It can provide structure, support and help through stress by a close relationship and reliance on the teacher (Kelly and Wallerstein). Skeen and Mc Kenry have recommended that books and discussions be used by the teacher to promote peer acceptance and support for the child from a divorced family.

Since the most widely used books in the classroom are the basal readers, it is important that stories portray family life in a realistic manner. According to Kelly and Wallerstein (1979) emphasis on the two-parent family has created a greater sense of aloneness and differentness in many children. Students should be able to identify with characters in basal stories and relate to other children living in single-parent homes. A child's ability to cope with life can be increased by providing exposure to various types of family styles. Although divorce is generally a traumatic experience with proper direction it can help a child learn to deal with life's problems (Sutton).

Robert Kealey (1980) has stated that reading helps a person to grow affectively and that stories can help students realize that other children do live happily in single-parent families.

Frank Brown (1980) has stated that school curriculums

must undergo changes to better meet the newly identified needs of a growing number of children from one-parent families. As reported by Patricia Mc Cormack (1981), a survey conducted by the National Committee for Citizens in Columbia, Maryland, found that only 8% of single parents said children's textbooks contained any families other than two-parent families. They complained that this contributed to their child's sense of "being out of it". Schools must realize that a increasing number of students come from one-parent homes.

Lindgrin (1962) noted that there must be a relationship of reading materials to a child's experiential background. Recently some research has focused on the types of family situations depicted in the reading material children use daily. Most of this research is based on the premise that the models of family life presented in basals communicate values to children and affect their attitude toward and acceptance of their own family living situations.

Since, according to Lerner (1981), basal readers are the major tool for reading instruction in 90% to 95% of the elementary classrooms throughout the country, they have been the subject of continual research and criticism.

Robert Kealey (1980) conducted a study of six second grade basal readers printed after 1978. The study was conducted to determine what types of families are presented in basal readers and how many stories of each type are in the

readers. The study concluded that 76% of the stories relate to children and adults in some type of family relationship. Approximately 38% of the children were found living in one-parent families. However, about 50% of the stories ignored the other parent entirely. 62% of the single-parent families in the basal readers were headed by mothers and the remaining 38% were headed by fathers. Even though he found that 40% of the children in basal readers have siblings, less than 10% have three or more. No mention was made of deceased or divorced parents, separation was inferred only once and grandparents were stereotyped. There were no stories involving foster homes or adopted children. Kealey suggests that educators be aware that the models of family life presented in basal readers are communicating values to children.

Jane Sutton's study (1981) was based on a random sampling of seven basal reading series (grades 4,5,6). Three stories were selected from each book. The results showed that 76% of the stories surveyed involved a relationship between a child and some form of family. These results were in agreement with Kealey's findings. However, Sutton's findings show approximately 19% of the children were found living in one-parent families as opposed to Kealey's figure of 38%. Women headed 84% of the households while men headed 14%.

Sutton and Kealey both were concerned with the fact that the non-custodial parent was ignored. They feared that it

would make it more difficult for the child to accept and develop a relationship with this parent.

Although according to Norton (1978) 10% of all children live with a natural parent and a step-parent, step-parents were never mentioned in the stories. An after-effect of many divorces is the remarriage of a parent. A parent's remarriage is often stressful on the child. Teachers should be aware of this added stress. Margaret Mead has stated that "each American child learns early and in terror that his whole security depends on that single set of parents...we have never made adequate social provisions for the security and identity of the child if that marriage is broken." Mead also pointed out that children are often unable to commit themselves to a step-parent in a manner that will permit a meaningful relationship.

Nancy Evans conducted the most recent research in this area in April, 1982. She surveyed eight basal series grades 1-3. While the 1980 Census was predicted to show 45% of families having one-parent, she concluded that only 6% of the families are being depicted as one-parent families in the basal readers reviewed. Although 10% of all children in 1978 lived with a natural parent and a step-parent, no stories reflected this. Nancy Evans concluded that in basal readers "the typical family continues to be shown as two parents and two children living in a house in the suburbs".

As can be seen in the research related to this study,

family life has significantly changed in America over the last generation. Divorce causes a major upheavel in the lives of most children which can affect academic performance. Researchers agree that with the change of family lifestyles schools must help children to cope. One method suggested through literature is a representation of differing family units in the basal readers. Prior studies in this area have indicated conflicting conclusions as to whether the basal readers are meeting this need.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY FC -1982

TITLE OF BOOK _____ PUBLISHER _____ GRADE LEVEL _____

TITLE OF STORY _____ DATE OF PUBLICATION _____ PAGES _____

	2 biological parents	1 biological 1 step-parent	2 adoptive parents	foster parents	mother works	ref. in text	ref. in pictures
Two-parent family							
	mother only	father only	1 adoptive parent	divorce/ deceases	never married	ref. in text	ref. in pictures
One-parent family							
	custodial relative	grandparents non-custodial	babysitter	teacher		ref. in text	ref. in pictures
Significant adult mentioned							
	0	1	2	3	4 or more	ref. in text	ref. in pictures
Number of siblings							
	Urban	Suburban	Rural	no ref.		ref. in text	ref. in pictures
Location of story							

Comments: